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AUTHOR Chuong, Chung Hoang
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ABSTRACT

Recent arrivals to the United States from Vietnam have encountered many educational problems, as well as difficulties in social and psychological adjustment. Schools need to devise special strategies and instructional programs that meet the needs of Vietnamese American and other Southeast Asian American refugee students whose previous educational experiences are tremendously varied. To clarify the many problems and the diversity of backgrounds among the refugee children, the characteristics of the different refugee waves entering the United States since 1975 are described. Some of the specific problems facing educators and others working with refugees include the following: (1) unaccompanied minors arriving without families; (2) varied educational and linguistic characteristics, including different cultural views of instruction and the student's role; (3) the influence of religious and social tradition; and (4) adjustment issues, including parental reluctance to be involved in the school. Sensitivity, patience, and understanding on the part of school personnel are the crucial elements contributing to a positive experience for Vietnamese high school students. One table and 1 graph present information on refugee arrivals, and there is a 17-item list of references. (SLD)

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WORKING WITH VIETNAMESE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

CHUNG HOANG CHUONG

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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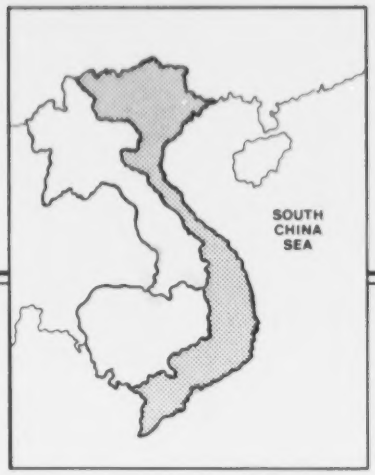
Working With Vietnamese High School Students



By Chung Hoang Chuong

In contrast to earlier reports that highlighted the educational achievements of Vietnamese refugee students (Whitmore, Caplan and Bui, 1985), recent arrivals from Vietnam have encountered many educational problems, as well as difficulties in social and psychological adjustment. Schools, therefore, need to devise special strategies and instructional programs that meet the needs of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugee students whose previous educational experiences are tremendously varied.

The 1986 report of the Office of Bilingual Education of the California State Department of Education estimated the total number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) Vietnamese students in California at 30,592 (TPRC/BEO, September 1986). This is an increase of almost 50% over 1981, when 22,826 Vietnamese students were identified as LEP. Further, these numbers do not include many Chinese-Vietnamese students, most of whom were identified as non-refugee Cantonese-speakers. It has been suggested that approximately 75% of the LEP and 25% of the Fluent English Proficient (FEP) Cantonese-speaking students in the state are Indochinese in origin (TPRC/BEO, September 1986).

This article is an attempt to identify the many problems facing Southeast Asian refugee students while making available to educators, counselors and providers of refugee services background information about the migration experience; knowledge of particular issues likely to impede the students' ability to learn English; and suggestions, both on instructing these children in the classroom, and on helping them adjust to their new environment.

The Refugee Waves

To understand the diversity of backgrounds among the refugee children, it is necessary to know the characteristics of the different refugee waves that have entered the United States since the fall of Saigon in 1975. To date, a total of 762,100 Southeast Asian refugees have been admitted to the United States, of whom 529,700 have been from Vietnam

(Refugee Reports, Dec. 13, 1985). These can be broken down into three distinct waves. The first wave started in 1975, and consisted mostly of Vietnamese (125,000 out of 131,000). According to data gathered by Dr. William Liu at Camp Pendelton during the early days of refugee admission, the majority of these refugees were young, relatively well-educated and skilled. By contrast, subsequent waves show an increase both in the proportion of other Southeast Asian groups, and in less favorable socioeconomic characteristics. (See table 1)

The second wave began in 1979, partly as the result of intensified conflict between Vietnam and China. Following the border war between the two countries, the Vietnamese government encouraged the emigration of ethnic Chinese through special underground organizations. Exit visas could be obtained semi-officially for payment, made in gold or cash, with rates varying according to an emigrant's financial resources. It is estimated that of the 380,000 refugees admitted to the United States during 1979-81, 237,000 were from Vietnam (Refugee Reports, December 15, 1985), and about 40% of these were ethnic Chinese (Wain 1981; Strand and Jones, 1985; Chung Hoang Chuong, 1985). In addition, the second wave also contained a large number of refugees from Cambodia and Laos, who had varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

A special problem arising from the second wave is the presence of many unaccompanied minors. From 1980 on, refugee workers started to see increasing numbers of adolescents who had left without their immediate families. These youngsters generally had little or no education because constant displacements during the war had forced them to discontinue their schooling. Many of these unaccompanied minors have therefore been unable to cope with the drastic changes they have experienced, and therefore frequently run into trouble with school authorities and law enforcement agencies.

The third wave of Southeast Asian refugees began in 1982 with the establishment of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). Refugees from the two earlier waves, having secured a permanent place of resettlement and achieved legal immigration status, could now sponsor their relatives from Vietnam for entry into the United States. Under a new agreement between the United States and Vietnam, these applications could be processed directly through an office in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). From 1982 on, therefore, many of the 80,000 Vietnamese who were admitted to the United States could no longer be considered refugees, but were regular immigrants.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE WAVES

In 1975, when the first group of refugee students arrived in the United States, many California school districts were caught unprepared. Especially in areas of large refugee concentration, the newcomers were faced with both bureaucratic snafus and lack of

compassion (Madrid, 1980). Fortunately, the majority of these students were sufficiently well-prepared educationally that they could adjust without too much difficulty.

There are many reasons for the smooth integration of the first wave. First, most students in this group did not undergo an extended period of school interruption. They left Vietnam at the end of April 1975, and were admitted to school in the United States by September.

Second, most of these students came with their families intact, and were largely from middle-class backgrounds, with extensive exposure to Western education. Surveys conducted at Camp Pendleton in 1975 and 1976 showed that 48% of heads of households had completed high school; 23% had completed college; and 4.5% had done graduate work (Liu, 1979). The majority of refugees in this wave had lived in large urban areas in Vietnam. Many had sent their children to private French schools or prominent Vietnamese public schools. They were from the upper level of Vietnamese society and had not been as affected by the lengthy conflict as their rural compatriots.

This is not to say that the children of the first wave faced no difficulties in adjusting. Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese student of the first wave, described the experience in this way:

> During my first year in high school, it was an entirely different situation. Here the shock of learning a new language and living in a new environment has easened [sic]. In its place was the eagerness to be accepted by my peers. Through my experience with discrimination, which came primarily in the form of cruel jokes, I soon discovered that to eliminate these irresponsible acts I must be accepted and respected by my peers. To win their respect, I tried to excel both academically and athletically.

Thanh is currently working as an engineer for a firm in the Los Angeles area.

The profile of the second and largest wave of refugees from Vietnam was very different. Fearful of economic sabotage by ethnic Chinese following Vietnam's border clash with China, the Vietnamese government, as previously noted, started to encourage the exit of Chinese-Vietnamese by granting semi-official exit visas for a fee. This massive exodus of ethnic Chinese, who had been part of the economic life of both North and South Vietnam for generations, was facilitated by allowing the departure of small vessels from the coast. Many of these vessels never made it to the neighboring countries, and many more were preyed upon by pirates before reaching refugee camps in first-asylum countries (Wain, 1981).

The tragedy of the "boat people" gained media attention with the visit of U.S. first lady Rosalynn Carter to the refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Her compassion and sensitivity helped raise the quota for admission to 14,000 refugees per month. In a two-year period, the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States jumped from 150,000 to 400,000 (including groups from Laos and Cambodia).

At this time, procedures governing sponsorship of refugees were also changed. From 1975 to 1978, only refugee organizations, voluntary agencies, church groups and U.S. citizens showing financial capabilities could sponsor refugees in Southeast Asian camps to enter the United States. Owing to the drastic increase in the number of refugees in the camps, and pressure from the countries providing temporary asylum, the United States changed the procedures to add relatives and friends of refugees to the sponsorship list. They can go through the refugee agencies that initially brought them over. Overnight, large metropolitan areas in California, such as Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco and San Jose, saw an influx of Southeast Asians, the majority of whom were Vietnamese.

The second wave of Vietnamese refugees ranged from the college-educated to those with little schooling. Their children, therefore, also varied. Some performed at grade level, while others, displaced by war or kept in refugee camps with no academic preparation, were as much as four years behind. Neither refugee workers nor educators were fully prepared to work with this new group. They had few resources or materials and had to rely on their ingenuity and experience to deal with problems as they came.

A number of refugee parents sought to remedy their children's lack of preparation by falsifying their ages to match the grade level at which they thought their children could function. Parents hoped that this would give the children enough time to catch up in English and other academic subjects. Unfortunately, many students have since found that their parents, playing safe, went too far. Finding themselves in a much younger group of students than themselves, many Vietnamese students have encountered social and psychological problems which have affected their schooling. Reverting to their real age, however, entails grappling with a mountain of paper work. There is no easy answer to this problem. Resettlement agencies are in the best position to inform incoming refugees about the issue and to provide alternative strategies and suggestions for parents.

The third wave of Southeast Asian refugees started in 1982 with a large influx of Cambodians and Laotians, including Lao Hmong and Lao Mien. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the 1984-85 quota was set at 32,000 entries from Southeast Asia, far fewer than the 156,000 allowed per year in 1981-82. Many of the latest group came to the United States by way of the ODP program, but many others continued to escape by small boats, or by walking across Cambodia to Thailand. From 1982 to 1985, there were 214,263 admissions from Southeast Asia, of which 117,251, or more than half, were from Vietnam.

The children of the third wave presented new challenges to resettlement workers and educators. The change from the children of highly motivated city dwellers to those from families that had spent most of their lives working in rice fields was marked by a dramatic decrease in adjustment and coping skills. While the first group suffered no interruption in schooling, the children of the latest group had been through several major educational changes even before they arrived in the United States. In Vietnam, the new government switched from a traditional educational system to a curriculum that required participation in non-academic activities such as community work, political education meetings and other volunteer tasks. Further, these children lost far more time awaiting resettlement than those in the first wave, spending 12 to 24 months in refugee camps where no formal instructional program was available.

The remainder of this paper will address specific problems facing educators and others working with refugees. First, however, we should note that many voluntary agencies distinguish only between two waves: refugees who came in 1975, and those who arrived later. However, in my opinion, it is necessary to distinguish between three: a predominantly Vietnamese wave in 1975, in which most refugees were relatively well-prepared for the adjustment to a new life; a second, mixed wave composed largely of Chinese-Vietnamese that contained the bulk of the "boat people;" and a third wave, since 1982, which is a melange of all Southeast Asian groups, with a large number of legal Vietnamese immigrants who entered under the ODP. (To my knowledge, there is no similar program for Cambodian and Laotian refugees.)

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

School districts in areas of large refugee concentration have had to cope with a special group who came mostly in the second and third waves: the unaccompanied minors. This group is comprised largely of Chinese-Vietnamese and Vietnamese students.

After 1978, many families in Vietnam, having been cheated on numerous occasions by fraudulent escape organizers, could no longer afford the cost of arranging to leave the country. As a last resort, these families often pulled together enough money to send one family member, usually an adolescent male, with friends or relatives who planned and could afford to escape. Once resettled in the United States, the relative or friend, caught in the struggle for survival in the new environment, could no longer care for the extra member of the family. Many simply asked the youngster to move out or referred him to the county Department of Social Services. Alone and without support or supervision, these unaccompanied minors are having a very difficult time adjusting educationally and emotionally.

Early reports indicated that approximately 800 unaccompanied minors were admitted

between 1975 and 1979 (*Refugee Reports*). With the large influx during 1980 - 81, this number increased and is estimated now at more than 5,000 across the United States.

Unaccompanied minors present a peculiar set of problems for resettlement and refugee workers. Since they are not orphans, they are placed, not for adoption, but in foster homes. Cultural differences and language difficulties contribute to the frequent misunderstandings between foster parents and these minors. The lack of trained bilingual and bicultural social workers exacerbates the problem. Many of these youth are uncertain of their caretaker's obligations and misunderstand their own rights (Baker, 1981). Unresolved issues often cause the youngster to move out or, as one Juvenile Court counselor expressed it, to "simply skip town to go to large refugee concentrations where they can find friends and ways to survive."

Foster care does not exist in Vietnam. The extended family provides enough choices of shelter and support that a young adolescent disagreeing with his parents could stay with an aunt or other relative for a few days until things get worked out. Lacking that kind of safety net in the United States, the unaccompanied minors experience isolation and depression, and frequently turn to the streets for "help."

There are currently few programs designed to assist unaccompanied minors from Southeast Asia. An April 1981 article in *New West* magazine described in detail the problem of youth gangs among Southeast Asian refugees. More recently, articles about the problems of stress and confusion among the "lost generation" of Southeast Asians have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, (December 13, 1987) and the *Boston Globe Magazine* (June 14, 1987). Many members of the gangs mentioned in these articles have been recruited from the unaccompanied minor group. Some efforts have been directed at this issue, but they are far from providing a solution.

There are no easy answers to this problem. ESL classes and orientation programs are short-term answers. In the long term however, what may be needed are good supportive services, trained personnel and practical training programs combined with language training specific to the client in question. This is an area where it would be appropriate for refugee agencies and educational agencies to work together in designing long-term programs to redirect these individuals to productive fields of endeavor.

EDUCATIONAL AND LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS

The majority of the Vietnamese students who came to the United States as refugees have very little ability in English. Some may have been exposed to English or French as a second language between grades 6 and 12 (Kelly, 1978). However, given the war and the frequent displacements experienced by most, few received this training in a continuous manner.

Even students who received language training in Vietnam often found that their training was inadequate once they arrived in this country. While there is a long tradition of foreign language instruction in Vietnam, the focus tends to be on grammar, translation and reading. As a result, the Vietnamese student usually has more knowledge about rules of grammar and spelling written English than facility in spoken English. Consequently, many students experience difficulty with ESL (English as a Second Language) which emphasizes oral interaction to develop verbal skills before teaching grammar, reading and writing.

Vietnamese students have an advantage over Cambodian, Laotian and Chinese students in studying English, in that Vietnamese writing uses the Roman alphabet with the addition of diacritical marks to represent different tonal values. However, English and ESL teachers should note that in the areas of grammar and pronunciation these students still experience problems.

Vietnamese words are for the most part monosyllabic, pronounced without final sounds or consonant clusters. Vietnamese students, therefore, tend to drop the final sounds in English. Vietnamese is also a tonal language — most words are pronounced with different tones to express different meanings. It is not uncommon to hear Vietnamese students adding extra tones to English words. Conversely, lacking experience with the polysyllabic words characteristic of European languages, Vietnamese students have difficulty stressing the correct syllable in English pronunciation. (For a complete discussion of Vietnamese linguistic characteristics, see *A Handbook for Teaching Vietnamese Speaking Students*, California State Department of Education, 1981, or Huynh Dinh Te's Introduction to Vietnamese Culture, Multifunctional Resource Center, 1987.)

Professor Nguyen Dang Liem, a teacher-trainer in the field of language acquisition, has suggested that ESL teachers should make use of existing linguistic theories to improve teaching materials and pedagogical techniques. This, of course, should be done with consideration for the particular characteristics of each student. As Corder (1978) has pointed out, good language teachers constantly adapt their speech to the capacities of their pupils rather than slavishly following a preordained linguistic syllabus.

From the teacher's standpoint, one difficulty in teaching Vietnamese students is their reluctance to participate in class discussion. It is estimated that while American students talk 90% of the time to the teacher's 10%, the ratio is reversed for Vietnamese students (Nguyen Dinh Khang, 1976).

The problem is that Vietnamese students conceive of classroom instruction not as a dialogue, but as the impartation of knowledge by the teacher. The student's job is to internalize what has been taught, regardless of its usefulness. The teacher's role is to

evaluate student comprehension mostly by their ability to memorize the entire lesson. This process of repetition, recitation and internalization has been practiced for many years.

The tradition of passive learning creates problems for Vietnamese students in this country, not only in classroom participation but in a number of tasks they are regularly expected to perform. Research papers or book reports, for example, require critical thinking skills which most refugee students have never acquired. Accustomed to memorization, they are now faced not only with new subject matter taught in an unfamiliar language, but with the need to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize what has been taught. Much of the written work produced by Vietnamese students is often found unsatisfactory for these reasons.

THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITION

Much is made of the idea that Confucianism produces a drive to excel academically. In both electronic and print media this explanation is widely given for the successes of Asian immigrant groups, and it generally is accepted without question.

Confucianism undoubtedly has been a powerful influence on Vietnamese culture through the centuries. Variously described as a religious philosophy or a code of social behavior (Thuy, 1976), Confucianism stresses personal growth or self-cultivation, while prescribing the maintenance of order in society and family through the practice of proper social rites. A typical characterization of Confucian values found in a number of teacher guides gives the following ranking of authority figures: the father ranks below the teacher who ranks only below the king. From this the inference is generally drawn that if Vietnamese students are reluctant to question teachers when they are confused, it is because of the persistence of Confucian values. Similarly, the educational achievements of Vietnamese students are generally ascribed to the Confucian emphasis on learning. This explanation overlooks many complexities. Times have changed. The war not only inflicted damage on the traditional family structure, it also radically affected behavior. Many customs and cultural patterns have been challenged or faded away. Thus, such commonly cited "Confucian" traits as not looking directly into another person's eyes might be simply a normal reaction to not being able to understand or answer in the new language. Similarly, such East/West dichotomies as those concerning views of human nature — Americans view human nature as basically evil but perfectible; Vietnamese view human nature as basically good but corruptible — may be too simplistic.

Many refugee guides addressing cultural issues are, therefore, based on outdated literature. For example, Francois Sully's work is still used though it was published in 1971. Even at that time it did not accurately describe a society caught up in armed struggle.

Updated research is badly needed concerning the Southeast Asian cultures in general and Vietnamese culture in particular. Until such studies are available, we need to exercise caution in using the existing literature. Further, any new findings or updated validations need to be combined with the observation of the instructor in providing answers to practical problems.

ADJUSTMENT ISSUES

A new refugee student in an American school is confronted daily with many questions: What am I supposed to do? Who can I talk to about my problems? Where can I go for the answers? Why do they laugh at me? and many more. School personnel, therefore, should be aware of the need to orient both students and their parents to:

- The organization of the American educational system, from elementary through secondary to college levels;
- Expected behavior in and out of the classroom;
- Details of different educational options;
- Duties and responsibilities of school personnel;
- How academic performance is graded;
- Knowledge of the surrounding community and its services;
- Parent education and involvement.

These issues will arise even for students who went to high school in Vietnam. The two educational systems are quite different. The high school curriculum in South Vietnam (before 1975) emphasized academic subjects at the expense of extracurricular activities. In the classroom, Vietnamese teachers maintain a more rigid code of behavior than their American counterparts. Outside the classroom, Vietnamese students are expected to follow the same code of behavior — that is, to show respect and rational obedience to parents, teachers and elderly persons (California State Department of Education, OBBE, 1982). (Again, it should be remembered that this is an ideal that many students do not meet.)

A second problem arises from the wide variety of courses in American schools. Vietnamese students are often confused about what courses they can take and about graduation requirements. Students must be provided with specific guidelines as to whom they can consult on these issues, as part of an overall description of the duties and responsibilities of school personnel.

A related area in which teachers can assist Vietnamese students and their families is by providing information about available community resources that they can contact or

use. The newcomer family is often beset with many initial resettlement problems, so any assistance and guidance is well received and wholeheartedly appreciated.

Thirdly, as noted earlier, Vietnamese students have been taught to memorize materials. They often experience difficulty when teachers ask them to give their own analysis or reaction to materials, provide an evaluation of the readings, or to synthesize arguments.

Finally, teachers should be aware that in Vietnam parents have little contact with the school system. They depend totally on teachers for the intellectual development of their children. What Americans might think of as indifference is actually an expression of total confidence in the abilities of teachers and administrators. This problem is, of course, exacerbated by parents' poor command of English and traditional passivity toward all policy making.

To get parents involved, one might use the following strategy: 1) make frequent contact with parents and apprise them of their children's progress; 2) offer parents services such as citizenship preparation courses, community service orientation, and adult ESL programs; 3) invite parents to be part of the advisory committee; 4) promote home activities between parents and students; and 5) bring parents in for cultural activities and other school programs.

At home Vietnamese students have to deal with a new set of problems. Due to the effect of immigration and secondary migration (see Van Esterik, 1982), many refugee families face a myriad of unfamiliar social service forms and requirements for refugee services in addition to the problem of adjusting to a new neighborhood. These activities often demand that the adolescent family members help in filling out forms, in making appointments, and in contacting the social service departments. These tasks take the student away from homework duties and study time. On top of this, many find they have to do a balancing act between the pressure to be accepted by peers at school, and the pressure to revert to traditional behavior upon walking through the door at home. This dual role, combined with the family pressure to do well at school while performing a number of other tasks for the family, has proved a source of tension and stress. Caught between traditional values and the requirements of modern society, many simply cannot cope and run away from home.

In the area of cross-cultural communication, school administrators, teachers and counselors need to keep in mind areas of possible conflict in school and in the classroom. First, as noted earlier, classroom activities such as participating in a discussion or cooperative exercises create difficulties as students are not culturally prepared to interact in the expected way. Some of these difficulties can be eased by allowing students to use their native language in the classroom, particularly in cooperative exercises. This also

allows advanced students to explain concepts and ideas to the newcomers, and can ease the burden on the teacher.

Secondly, according to Ascher (1984), discipline problems may arise for any of the following reasons:

1. Frustration due to language problems and misunderstanding;
2. Imitation of inappropriate behavior patterns out of a desire to conform;
3. Behavior acquired during refugee camp life where survival was paramount and theft and physical violence were common;
4. Historical animosity between various Southeast Asian groups;
5. Difficulty adjusting to school rules that are less strict and well-defined than those students are used to;
6. Culture gaps in the families resulting from different rates of assimilation.

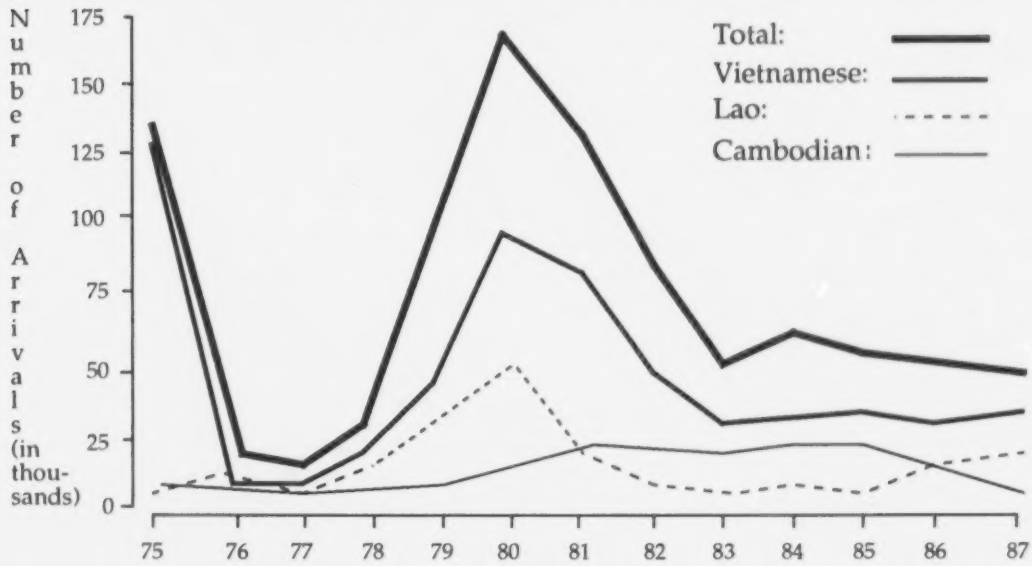
Here the role of the school counselor is extremely important. Knowledge of cross-cultural communication and orientation techniques would be very helpful. An understanding of intragroup dynamics can help defuse tension between different ethnic groups. Counseling sessions should be conducted parallel to ESL programs, and are most effective when done in the native language with the assistance of refugee organizations or mutual assistance associations (Nguyen Dang Liem, n.d.).

Classroom participation, social development and adjustment are far from being automatic. Vietnamese students have had very little time to prepare themselves for the new school environment. They suffer from a tendency not to ask questions when needed; to keep academic and social problems to themselves; and to make little effort to cross ethnic lines in order to bridge cultural gaps. Their strongest asset is that many are very conscientious about school and strive to do well under difficult learning conditions.

CONCLUSION

There is no prescribed formula to work with these new immigrant students. The diversity of their backgrounds emphasizes the importance of not only examining individual background characteristics during the initial placement process, but also, seeing how such characteristics fit with those of the school setting. The well-adjusted Vietnamese high school students are those who are attuned to, not only the academic, but also the social environment of the school. This is an area where administrators, teachers and counselors can help the newcomer students a great deal in providing the proper services and support. Many questions about the experience of the Vietnamese high school students have yet to be answered, but it is clear that the sensitivity, patience and understanding on the part of school personnel are the crucial elements contributing to a positive experience for the Vietnamese high school students within school walls.

Table I
From *Refugee Reports*, December 18, 1987
Southeast Asian Refugee Arrivals in the United States by Nationality, FY 75-87



Federal	Country of Nationality			
Fiscal Year	Cambodia	Laos	Vietnam	Total a/
1987	1,539	15,564	23,012	40,115
1986	10,054	12,894	22,443	45,391
1985	19,131	5,181	25,209	49,528
1984	19,849	7,224	24,927	52,000
1983	13,114	2,835	23,459	39,408
1982	20,234	9,437	43,656	73,327
1981	27,100	19,300	86,100	132,500
1980	16,000	55,500	95,200	166,700
1979	6,000	30,200	44,500	80,700
1978	1,300	8,000	11,100	20,400
1977	300	400	1,900	2,600
1976	1,100	10,200	3,200	14,500
1975	4,600	800	125,000	130,400
TOTAL	140,321	177,535	529,706	847,569

a/ Total may not agree with U.S. State Department annual arrival data because they are based on different data files.
Source: Linda W. Gordon, Chief Statistician, ORR, "Southeast Asian Refugee Migration to the United States," September 1984, and Office of Refugee Resettlement, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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